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Abstract

The digital transformation in the public sector is a converging trend in many social protection systems. In France, it is being combined with the gradual closure of many government offices, particularly those responsible for managing social security benefits. This article focuses on one of the consequences of these developments. They lead to an increase in requests for support and help from individuals experiencing administrative burdens. They make their requests to a range of very different local actors, who do not always have the skills or the responsibility to respond to them. Based on a study carried out in social centres in France, this article presents the role of third parties in reducing the administrative burden. More specifically, it investigates the types of costs associated with the administrative burden to which social centres have to respond, and who meets them. The article analyses the tensions posed by this growing role, which range from professional and organisational to political.

KEYWORDS

administrative burden, digital transformation, non-take-up, social centres, third parties

INTRODUCTION

'We spend our time doing paperwork'. This sentence, pronounced by a social worker working with young people, is far from anecdotal. It sums up a growing feeling expressed by many social workers in France, but also by actors who do not work directly in the social field. Librarians, secretaries of town halls and community workers, among others, report increasingly frequent requests from citizens for help in renewing their identity papers or driving licences, in printing or scanning health insurance forms, in keeping track of their tax returns, and in applying for benefits. Assistance and guidance with administrative tasks are thus becoming part of the practices of professionals (or volunteers) who work in a wide variety of local organisations, and whose main duties are often unrelated to these requests.

These observations are mainly the effects of two simultaneous processes, both of which are profoundly changing the relationship between administrators and users and are not specific to France. The first central development is the digital transformation of the public sector, which has led to cultural, organisational and relational changes (Mergel et al., 2019). Initiated in the late 1990s in France, digital transformation gradually emerged as a public policy before accelerating and becoming widespread. It has since become a central axis of Western states' reform policies, with a target of 100%

digitised administrative procedures. Digital services have thus become the new standard for public service. Most administrative procedures are now accessible online, sometimes without any other alternative. Facilitated by technical developments, according to its promoters, digital transformation pursues objectives of the modernisation of public action, administrative simplification and budgetary rationalisation (Okbani et al., 2022).

A growing body of research documents the effects of the digital transformation on the organisations and professions of social work (Jacob & Souissi, 2022; Okbani, 2022) and, among other things, the outcomes experienced by citizens. The research emphasises the gap between the claimed benefits of the digital transformation, which is supposed to reduce the administrative burden (Alauzen, 2019), and the administrative difficulties that it creates and/or reinforces in practice. More importantly, access to, and the use of, digital technology have become a new and implicit conditionality for access to social rights (Mazet, 2017). This conditionality implies elements that go beyond the possession of computer equipment and access to the Internet, to encompass digital skills that fall under the category of digital literacy (Warschauer, 2002), such as the ability to navigate government websites, to open a personal online space, etc. The impact of the digital transformation is strongest among the poorest populations, who have to carry out more administrative procedures than others. Thus, half of the people who have encountered difficulties in administrative procedures in France are in situations of material and social deprivation (Gleizes et al., 2022). This finding strengthens the results of research on the administrative burden, which has shown that the consequences of this burden are stronger for populations with the least administrative capital (Nisar & Masood, 2022) or human capital (Christensen et al., 2020), as well as more generally for low socioeconomic groups (Daigneault & Macé, 2020; Moynihan et al., 2015). Finally, the individual outcomes of the digital transformation are analysed from the point of view of inequalities in access to rights and the (non-)take-up of social benefits (Revil & Warin, 2019).

This digital transformation has been combined in France with a reorganisation of public services. This second development is resulting in a change in the way people are received. With a view to financial and organisational rationalisation, public service providers now favour digital and telephone access channels and, in physical terms, reception by appointment. This change particularly affects the social welfare organisations that provide social benefits. The missions of these reception centres are changing, as are their locations. Many reception centres or physical offices previously used by administrations in France are progressively being closed.

This article analyses the impacts of the transformations of the administrative relationship from the perspective of territorial actors who give support to those requiring assistance with accessing social rights. These transformations contribute to a growing responsibility on the part of citizens for administrative work that was previously the duty of public service providers (Okbani et al., 2022) or professional caseworkers (Madsen et al., 2022). To reduce the administrative burden, citizens' strategies are very diverse and so far, have been little documented (Nisar & Masood, 2022). First and foremost, they request help from people they know (family members, neighbours, etc.). They also mobilise local actors to get assistance and in-person training and support, mainly for online access to social rights (Defender of Rights, 2022). This article focuses on the growing role of local organisations which offer help to people struggling to access their benefits, by offering services previously provided by the public service providers. More specifically, it questions the role played by organisations whose primary mission is not administrative assistance and support, unlike professionals who help the public with digital literacy (Borelle, Pharabod, & Peugeot, 2022). The transformations of the administrative relationship are so significant that they involve a diversity of social infrastructures (Giest & Samuels, 2023).

Within this approach, I will discuss the research on administrative burden. Of the three main streams of research (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021), one focuses on the role of street-level bureaucrats, and on their perceptions and experiences of the administrative and regulatory burden (Bell et al., 2020), which varies by individual, organisation and context (Stanica et al., 2022). Other work focuses more specifically on the practices of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), which can reduce or increase the experience of administrative burden. In this development of a research agenda on administrative burden, there is a nascent but growing line of research that aims to understand the role of third-party actors (Heinrich, 2016; Moynihan et al., 2015). One of the aims of this research is to move away from the image of administrative burden as being the result of an 'obstruction between government service users, and government services', or in other words a 'two-party narrative' (Tiggelaar & George, 2023). Indeed, third-party actors can alter administrative burdens, by increasing (Barnes, 2020) or reducing them, particularly because they have considerable latitude to develop new practices. For example, they can help to reduce learning and compliance costs (Nisar & Masood, 2022), and can also provide an

alternative space for marginalised groups which is useful in their interactions with the state, as Nisar has shown (Nisar, 2018).

Therefore, this paper contributes to the literature on the role of third-party actors, that is, 'actors outside the citizen-state interaction that provide help to citizens or otherwise influence interactions' (Halling & Bækgaard, 2023). While research includes (ex-)family members in these third parties, the focus here is on third-party organisations, from private profit-making actors (such as the tax-preparation industry [Moynihan et al., 2015]) and advocacy and community groups, to non-governmental actors more broadly.

To empirically contribute to the understanding of the role of third-party actors in mediating administrative burdens, this article analyses social centres in France. Social centres, as local organisations present in many municipalities, are worried by the amount of requests for administrative assistance and support. Based on the case study of social centres, which is a typical case study of third-party actors, the article seeks to answer the following questions: in the wake of the transformation of the administrative relationship, how do third-party actors such as social centres help individuals to bear the costs of administrative burdens? How do professionals and volunteers at the social centres experience these demands for administrative services?

To answer these questions, the article is structured as follows. After presenting the research context and the method, there are two sections. The first section will focus on actions that reduce the various types of administrative burden, while also specifying that these actions involve professionals with very diverse levels of responsibility and missions. The second section will describe the three types of tension raised by the growing demand for administrative help from individuals, at the professional, organisational and political levels.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Research context

This article focuses on social centres because they are among the most important social work actors in France. The first social centre was created in 1896 in Paris, inspired by initiatives developed in England and the United States (Durand, 2006). The spread of social centres took place mainly after the Second World War in France, in response to the implementation of family support policy and mass urbanisation.

Social centres are community facilities financed by social welfare organisations (the family allowance funds[1]), local authorities (mainly the French *municipalités*) and by the state and other partners. These social centres have a dual function: to provide social services and to organise community events and activities (Cohen, 2023). Their objectives are to 'create and foster social links, stimulate democratic debate, support mobilisation and projects by local communities, and build better living conditions'.[2] These missions result in the implementation of a wide variety of social, educational, and cultural services and activities. For example, social centres run recreation centres and play centres, as well as parent/child centres, French language workshops and neighbourhood festivities.

Social centres operate on the basis of territorial action. Their governance (by an association or a local authority), size, projects[3] and the composition of their teams and relationships with local partners, all vary greatly depending on the area (Cortéséro, 2020a). However, social centres share a set of common values. The network of social centres has thus recently reaffirmed a political role of supporting social transformation (Neveu, 2016) and an emancipatory goal, in line with the long-standing tradition of popular education in social centres and the more recent tradition of 'empowerment'. The latter was placed at the centre of the charter of social and socio-cultural centres adopted in 2000. In particular, the activities aim to 'increase the power of individuals and groups over their own destiny' (Cortéséro, 2020b), to develop the capacities of residents, with them and not for them, and to promote the figure of the user-actor (Cohen, 2023). In this respect, social centres operate on the basis of cooperation between employees and volunteers, the latter participating in the development of the social project, the implementation of actions, and the running and management of the social centre.

There are a total of 3700 social centres in France,[4] mostly in urban areas and popular neighbourhoods. They operate as a network, following the French administrative organisation system (departmental, regional and national federations). Our study is situated within the framework of a regional federation of 327 social centres.

[1]In 1971, the *Caisse Nationale des Caisses d'Allocations Familiales* created an accreditation system for social centres, providing them with funding known as 'service provision' for this local and global social function.

[2]Extract from the website of the French federation of social and sociocultural centres.

[3]Social centres must define their objectives every 4 years in order to apply for public funding.

[4]For ease of reading in this article, I use the generic term 'social centre', which covers two types of structures that are members of the French federation of social and sociocultural centres (the 'social centres' and the 'social living spaces').

Many professionals and volunteers from the social centres raised the issue of closures of state offices and rising administrative burdens in 2019 and asked the regional federation to intervene. They mentioned the increasing number of requests from individuals for help with administrative procedures, and reported situations of discouraged or sometimes angry individuals facing issues with state digital services and the feeling of no longer getting answers to questions addressed to the administrations. The COVID-19 health crisis highlighted the importance of this issue in several ways. It brought to light 'new groups' facing socio-economic difficulty, who are unfamiliar with aid schemes (Olm, 2022), some of whom contacted social centres for the first time. Furthermore, during this period, the main public services remained closed to the public, which sped up the digital transformation, thus increasing the demand for digital support. In some territories, social centres were the only organisations that remained open to the public throughout the lockdowns in France.

These observations led the regional federation to develop a study in partnership with the research team to which I belong. The aim of this study was to look for the first time at the issue of the non-take-up of social rights as seen by the social centres, by seeking to understand the types of situations that these take and to identify the practices of those involved. Among these practices, the study aimed to understand how social centres respond to requests for administrative assistance from individuals, particularly in relation to online procedures. With this study, the regional federation sought to enrich the field of competence of social centre workers, through a period of reflection about their daily practices, and to use the results to define an intervention strategy for the social centres.

Methodology

The data were collected from late 2020 to early 2022, using a mixed method approach combining a questionnaire survey and focus groups with social centre staff.

First, the development of the questionnaire was based on the National Observatory of Social Centres, which since 2012 has aimed to improve knowledge about social centres and their practices. It carries out an annual survey by questionnaire sent to all the social centres that are members of the National Federation. The questionnaire contains a module on access to benefits which only gives a general view. It shows, for example, that more than 9 out of 10 social centres are committed to easing access to social rights through measures designed to fight digital inequality and through the presence of institutions or public writers. The observatory estimates that more than 600,000 people have received information on their rights in social centres.

In addition, a regional questionnaire was created in order to further this knowledge and to analyse the issue of non-take-up in social centres, and thus to understand how these situations are managed and what they mean for centre staff. It was carried out by a working group made up of social centres and some of their partners, as well as the author of this article. A first group of questions covered the place of non-take-up in the social centres' action plans; the expected role of social centres in dealing with these situations; and the causes of non-take-up upon which social centres act. The questions asked on this last point incorporate the three dimensions of administrative burden conceptualised by Herd and Moynihan (2018).[5] A second group of questions dealt with the individual and collective actions taken in response to non-take-up, and in particular to requests for administrative assistance. A third group of questions addressed the partnership dimension and examined the ways in which the issue of non-take-up was (or was not) dealt with by other local associations and/or local administrations. Finally, two last questions allowed the social centres to express themselves freely. On the one hand, they were asked to present a situation involving the non-take-up of benefits that had caused difficulties for their team. Second, they were asked to explain what best describes the role of social centres in the fight against non-take-up. The quotations in the present article are entirely drawn from the answers to these two open questions, which are indicated in inverted commas.

The questionnaire was sent out in mid-2021 to all the regional federation's social centres, at the same time as the questionnaire usually sent out by the National Observatory of Social Centres. It was completed by 72% of the region's structures (compared to 94% for the basic questionnaire), which resulted in 355 respondents. Only the social centres in the region's main urban centre are under-represented; otherwise, the respondents reflect the diversity of the territories in which social centres are located, as well as the diversity of the modes of governance (associative or municipal governance).

Second, we organised focus groups in the region's departments between January and October 2021. These were conducted by a professional from the regional federation and also involved the author of the article. Eight

[5]To the question of what is done in social centres to deal with situations of the non-take-up of social rights, the answer options were, for example: 'informing people about the benefits for which they would be eligible', 'helping people with administrative procedures (online or on paper)' or 'physically accompanying people to social workers'.

meetings took place in different formats, adapt to the evolution of the health situation linked to the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, two of the meetings were held remotely by videoconference. In total, nearly 200 people from the social centres attended, mainly professionals identified by the federations as being particularly concerned by the issues and, more rarely, volunteers or board members of the social centres. The focus groups varied in length, from 2 h to a full day. In these sessions, the participants were first invited to share their representation of non-take-up (e.g., the forms and causes of non-take-up, most exposed groups). The second part focused on the professional practices and actions taken (or to be taken) against non-take-up. Several questions dealt with requests for administrative assistance and how professionals responded or did not respond. The practitioners were asked to specify the benefits these requests pertained to, the resources mobilised to respond to them, and the constraints they faced in doing so. The moderators made notes of all the focus groups so that a summary could be produced for each group.

The analysis was produced in a collaborative manner, involving professionals from the regional Federation of Social Centres in the presentation of the results of the questionnaire and the summaries of the focus groups. A thematic analysis of the qualitative data (i.e., the summaries and open questions at the end of the questionnaire) was carried out. We were able to classify the data according to the four types of non-take-up identified by Warin (2014): non-take-up due to non-knowledge, non-request, non-receipt and non-proposal. An inductive approach was then taken in analysing the data around the themes that gradually emerged. This was the case, for example, with the tensions generated by requests for administrative assistance, which enabled us to distinguish different sub-themes in the analysis (tensions for those involved, in the organisation and projects of the social centres, and in their partnership relations).

RESULTS

Addressing the administrative burden

In this first section, I will look at what social centres do, and who does it within the centres, to help people with their requests for administrative assistance.

Requests for administrative assistance on the increase in social centres

In this study dealing with non-take-up, the administrative burden quickly emerged as a central subject, relegating some of the issues of non-take-up such as the relevance of social policies (Warin, 2018). The focus groups and the questionnaire mainly dealt with 'experiences of administrative burden' (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021) and the negative outcomes of this burden in the form of non-take-up. The agents observe effects on the two main types of non-take-up, 'primary' and 'secondary' non-take-up (van Oorschot, 1995).[6] The examples given highlight the individuals' need for knowledge about their rights, but also some situations of non-receipt of the benefits associated with the right (Warin, 2014). The agents describe receiving different people: those who find themselves either stuck or slowed down by administrative procedures, those who experience interruptions to benefit payments, or those who abandon their procedures, for example after experiencing difficulties with online procedures.

> We are rarely approached about non-take-up situations because of a lack of knowledge of rights. More often, people are being blocked, due to multiple factors. On several occasions, we have received people who have lost their social rights, benefits for returning to work, or the right to work because their residence permit had expired and the delays in processing them at the Prefecture had become considerably longer. It is therefore difficult for us to deal with the dramatic consequences that it implies for these people. (an urban social centre).

According to some agents, the importance of the issue of administrative burdens is due to the very common (even daily) and increasing demands made by individuals for assistance, especially since the digital transformation. This observation is shared by all the social centres in the region, but takes on a particular relevance in rural areas, which combine the need to respond to particular difficulties (poorer internet access, populations with limited mobility, etc.) in a context of lower administrative capacity (Mohsin Ali et al., 2021). Social centres in these areas are sometimes the only actors assisting in access to benefits, without being able to count on a local partnership. For example, only 22% of the centres host offices of local administrations and actors (social services, etc.), while 39% have no such offices in their geographical area of activity. Feelings of greater responsibility in the face of

[6]Primary non-take-up occurs when an eligible person does not receive a benefit because they have not applied for it, and secondary non-take-up describes a situation in which an eligible person applies for a benefit but does not receive it in full.

these demands and of isolation were repeatedly expressed by social centres located in these territories:

> The role of our centre [in dealing with requests for administrative assistance] is necessary, crucial, but we feel alone and sometimes powerless in certain situations. (a rural social centre).

Interventions on the full range of administrative burden costs

In classifying how the actions of social centres impact the administrative burden experienced by individuals, the typology of the components of administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2018) is relevant, although it is empirically difficult to make precise distinctions between them (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021). First, social centres intervene in learning costs. For instance, 46% of the social centres give priority to providing individual information about the programme, potential eligibility, and the administrative procedures to be followed. Moreover, 52% give priority to referring people to local administrations, social workers, or associations with a public service mission. Three terms are frequently used in the summaries of the role of social centres proposed by respondents: welcoming, informing, and guiding. They are '*the first point of contact*' for individuals, offering them a '*place where information and guidance can be provided*', and a '*resource centre*' that acts as a '*point of contact*', a '*relay*' or a '*bridge*' to welfare organisations.

Second, social centres aim to reduce compliance costs since 56% of social centres mention that their priority is to provide individual assistance to people with administrative procedures (either online or on paper). Regarding digital services, 88% of social centres provide assistance in using computer equipment (e.g., computers, scanners, printers, etc.) and direct assistance in entering or monitoring files online. In addition, 12% of the social centres provide physical assistance to people in their dealings with the authorities. In terms of compliance costs, the terms most often used to describe the role of social centres are those of '*facilitator*' and '*mediator*'.

Lastly, the practices of social centres aim to reduce psychological costs, particularly linked to the digital transformation. Digital technology, combined with the difficulty of finding an interlocutor in local administrations, has introduced strong uncertainties. These concern the follow-up of the user's administrative file and the consequences of administrative errors in the processing of files (Halling & Bækgaard, 2023), and/or errors in declarations. The fear of receiving undue payments is thus a reason for non-take-up that is increasing over time in France (Pirus, 2023). In this context, the role of social centres is to *reassure* people and *support* them in their administrative procedures. In terms of psychological costs, social centres also aim to reduce the sense of shame and stigma sometimes associated with claiming social benefits (Baumberg, 2016):

> For one person, after discussion, we understood that she had not wanted to use the income allowance because for her 'it's begging'. We reassured her, we explained her rights. She accepted because she understood that it was a right and not an emergency aid. (a rural social centre).

Administrative requests covering a variety of subjects

Social centres have observed an increase but also a diversification of requests for administrative assistance. They field requests to offset learning, compliance and psychological costs across a range of programmes. For example, during the focus groups and in the questionnaire, centres reported assisting with driver's licences, identity cards, over-indebtedness, food aid, information on the non-payment of housing benefit, access to healthcare, justice, benefits for the disabled, etc. Legal benefits are the most frequently cited, in particular minimum social benefits which have high non-take-up rates, such as the Active Solidarity Income (Hannafi et al., 2022). These means-tested benefits involve complex administrative procedures, which have a high level of administrative burden (Moynihan et al., 2015). Pension applications also have a prominent status. These procedures, with their particular emotional and symbolic charge, have been particularly affected by simplification and e-government reforms (Alauzen, 2019). These different programmes can be combined for the same person, as the following example illustrates:

> A person under guardianship and released from jail had not resubmitted his social benefits and therefore had no resources for a year or two. The administration had not notified the social services. We had to go through all the procedures again: Banque de France, psychiatrist's certificate, opening a bank account. I physically accompanied this person through all these steps so that his housing and disability benefits could be restored as soon as possible. (an urban social centre).

The approach of the social centres, which is to provide an unconditional, local and wide-ranging reception service, strengthens their gathering of these diverse requests. This contrasts with the increasing specialisation of local administrations, which focus on specific audiences. More generally, social centres 'distinguish themselves from a strict counter relationship structured by individual face-to-face interactions relating to a specific problem' (Cohen, 2023), positioning themselves as friendly 'third spaces' (Nisar, 2018), which are flexible and always available:

> The added value of the social centre is that it is a 'house of solidarity', a familiar place where people come for all sorts of occasions (to drop off their children on Wednesdays, to practice a sport or cultural activity, to share a time of conviviality, etc.). It is a place of proximity, a familiar place often positively identified by the inhabitants. (a rural social centre).

Specific issues emerge depending on the local sociodemographic context. For example, the rights of foreigners are a highly salient issue for some social centres, which attract requests for assistance from people who have difficulty speaking French. There are frequent requests for help with applications for asylum, naturalisation, and above all, the renewal of residence permits. The impacts are therefore strong (inability to work, loss of social rights, etc.), with the people making these requests finding themselves in a 'tertiary' non-take-up situation (Van Mechelen & Janssens, 2017).[7] The social centre workers then try to help with the major issue of arranging appointments at the government service (Prefecture). However, this is only done online, and at times that differ from the opening hours of the social centres, to maximise the possibility of obtaining an appointment:

> Generally, the team has difficulty making appointments online at the Prefecture for residence permit applications or renewals. Indeed, as the site is constantly jammed, colleagues have to connect at night in order to find a slot for people. (an urban social centre).

Administrative burdens taken on by agents with different roles

Each social centre, depending on the guidelines it follows (Cortéséro, 2013), defines how it deals with administrative requests and whether it addresses the issue of non-take-up in its social project. In this respect, only 13% of social centres include non-take-up as a central theme in their social project, and 36% do so as one amongst others. For 11% of the social centres, the fight against non-take-up will be addressed in the next social project, while 37% indicate that it is not formally indicated as an area of focus (although this does not mean that they do not act in this area).

Few social centres have set up a standalone organisation dedicated to requests for administrative assistance and support. Rather, the handling of these requests concerns a wide range of social centre agents, with very different levels of qualifications, missions, responsibilities and status. Both professionals and volunteers can be involved. However, the contribution of the latter is even more difficult to qualify and is not always identified, particularly when the is work carried out by low-income women (Cohen, 2023). The questionnaire did not distinguish between professionals and volunteers, although the literature shows that actions to reduce the burden rely mainly on volunteers (Giest & Samuels, 2023).

The results show that, among the agents in charge of the fight against non-take-up, those who ensure daily and close contact with the population are most frequently mentioned. Indeed, 65% of the social centres mobilise family advisors and 57% mobilise reception staff. Next come the managers (35%) and then the activities coordinators (30%). Only a quarter of the social centres involve public writers. In total, around one hundred public writers receive and support individuals in the social centres in the region studied here.

Requests for administrative assistance are not handled primarily by staff whose primary role it is to do so, and who are, as one social centre summarised: '*untrained, ill-equipped, but frequently solicited*'. Thus, the response to requests for help and administrative support overwhelms the centres in two senses. On the one hand, it involves a wide range of agents within the social centres. On the other hand, multiple activities and services are offered by the social centres.

Administrative work that is mainly invisible

In this context, the administrative assistance provided by social centres is difficult to document, especially in relation to identifying the times and the places where assistance is provided. It takes place at the reception desk, at the access to benefits sessions, at socio-linguistic workshops, but also in most collective activities. These activities represent spaces for meetings and discussions, and for sharing information between people attending the

[7]Tertiary non-take-up is a situation in which vulnerable persons are not entitled to a social provision due to eligibility rules.

social centres, in which the subject of administrative procedures can be addressed.

A large part of the actions in the social centres are based on 'ordinary administrative practices' (Borelle, Pharabod, & Solchany, 2022)—administrative work that is largely invisible and based on relationships. Discussions during the collective workshops sometimes revealed certain practices used for administrative assistance. These exchanges particularly highlighted the role of the 'administrative capital' of social centre staff (Nisar & Masood, 2022). Although this capital is not a recruitment criterion, it is strongly mobilised in practice. Participants explained that they rely on their personal experience in administrative procedures (e.g., in filing a claim for themselves or for a relative), which means they know the existence and functioning of social rights or how to navigate institutions' websites. Social capital is also key, in that knowing someone in one's professional or personal circle working in these administrations is one of the means used to get around the difficulty of contacting local administrations and thus obtain information on the progress of an administrative file. Finally, linguistic capital is essential in certain territories, with the ability to speak a foreign language.

Helping people to tackle the administrative burden: A subject of multiple tensions

The above data show how third parties such as social centres help to reduce the administrative burden on individuals, and how their navigator function can improve people's ability to access their social rights. This second section completes the analysis with a look at how these practices are experienced by the actors in the social centres, in order to point out the tensions generated at different levels.

Taking on the administrative burden calls into question professional postures and identities

Above all, it could be observed that the tensions are a matter of concern to the social centres' staff. The nature of residents' demands and the growing importance of administrative work are challenging professional identities and positions. The staff report that requests for administrative assistance are often urgent in nature. For example, when benefit payments are interrupted after a succession of obstacles in the administrative process, major consequences such as the loss of financial resources arise. The urgency of these requests demands a rapid response, which is incompatible with the objective that social centres give themselves of 'fostering administrative capital and helping individuals to face bureaucratic encounters better' (Tiggelaar & George, 2023), particularly in terms of their digital skills. Digital transformation reinforces the tension between the objective of 'doing things with' people and practices that require 'doing things without' them (such as creating an email address, filling in their files, etc.) in order to deal with their situation quickly.

This temporality places the social centres actors in a position that they describe as 'rescue':

> Firefighters. (a rural social centre).

> A lifeline in the ocean! Modern-day superheroes in spite of themselves. (an urban social centre).

This posture is held to the detriment of the 'passer-by' position sought by social centres.[8] It is more difficult to implement in areas where social centres are obliged to absorb most requests for administrative assistance due to the absence of other actors to whom to refer. For these reasons, social centre staff report a slow transformation of their profession and a shift in their professional identity, with administrative work now accounting for a notable proportion of their working time. The positions of the workers vary greatly between those who accept or reject this situation, which can be likened to 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1962), which is particularly observable in the case of digital assistance (Okbani, 2022), far from the primary missions linked to the promotion of social life:

> For us, we diagnose the problem and then we pass the baton. We are not there to solve the problem in the first place. Nowadays, we do the work of several social partners. (a rural social centre).

A tension with the reference frameworks

More importantly, requests for administrative assistance collide with the social centres' own reference frameworks. One dimension that was much debated during the study relates to the tension between requests for individual aid and the collective action register based on which most of the social centres' missions and activities are

[8]Encouraging professionals to adopt a position of 'mediator' rather than 'rescuer' is one of the objectives of developing people's empowerment, in line with the theories of Y. Le Bossé on which the social centres are based.

organised. In fact, 85% of the social centres surveyed by questionnaire offer individual support for administrative procedures, while 35% offer collective support (e.g., collective workshops to decipher a tax form, parents' cafés to discuss childcare services, etc.).

For a popular education movement, the need to respond to individual requests detracts from collective action operations as much as from the objectives of bringing together and defending the interests of local people. Some social centres see their role as a third-party actor as one of alerting and collectively mobilising individuals to raise their difficulties and improve the way administration works, that is, as a 'political stakeholder, willing to lobby for or against changes in administrative burden made by policymakers' (Moynihan et al., 2015). The great diversity in the subjects of requests for administrative assistance, the need to support the preparation of dossiers based on a relationship of trust, and the time required for this administrative assistance are among the perceived obstacles to collective action. This tension was expressed by the following questions in the collective workshops:

> How can we reconcile individual requests and collective facilitation approaches, the DNA of social centres? (an urban social centre).

> How to move from individual support to a more collective approach? (an urban social centre).

So, although they want to, the social centres express difficulty in assuming the role of policy entrepreneur, which is one way third sector organisations can alter administrative burdens (Tiggelaar & George, 2023).

Professionals faced with the limits of their actions

Growing demand for administrative assistance raises the recurring question among the agents we met in the social centres of the scope of their missions. More specifically, the main concerns relate to the limits of their interventions, that is, where and when their role ends. Administrative assistance and support pose dilemmas for these agents, which are intensified because their intervention framework is often imprecise. These elements contribute to the fact that administrative assistance and support produce 'disorders of professionalism' (Mazet & Sorin, 2020) or 'tests of professionalism', which refer to the fact that agents find themselves in 'great perplexity in the face of the uncertainty of the situations they encounter, because they are no longer able to discern exactly what they should do' (Ravon & Vidal-Naquet, 2016).

To illustrate this, three types of limitations are repeatedly cited by social centre agents. First, they express a high degree of uncertainty when requests for administrative assistance require them to deploy skills that they do not possess. Faced with the diversity of subjects to be dealt with, they point out the lack of technical and digital skills, the lack of training and/or updating of knowledge in the face of legislative changes, the difficulties encountered in locating local partners, and among other things, the difficulties in identifying existing social benefits:

> We ourselves are sometimes lost... so how do we accompany the inhabitants... sometimes even the professionals of the social centres do not know their rights. (an urban social centre).

Second, the question of limits takes on a moral dimension. There is a strong tension between the position of not wanting to do the work of local administrations on the one hand, and on the other, the idea of a local, unconditional, generalist reception and the reality of individuals' demands. In doing so, they are aware of the importance of their availability and the support they offer people, which reduces the administrative burden, particularly for those with the lowest resources (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). This tension between 'having to do' and 'being able to do' (Mazet & Sorin, 2020) is particularly visible in the social centres. Perceiving themselves as the last actor to whom people turn, and reporting situations that are sometimes demanding (crying residents, distress, anger, etc.), social centre workers report feeling a moral commitment to residents. While being aware that they have to set limits, they act as moral mediators (Pors & Schou, 2021) for individuals in need, choosing '*not to let them down*', and '*not to leave them alone*'. At several points in the focus groups, they were able to share how personally affected they had been by certain situations and how it is not possible *not* to respond to the requests.

Finally, the question of '*how far to intervene*' incorporates not only a moral dimension, but also ethical and legal dimensions. The digital transformation particularly reinforces this aspect. Helping and accompanying people requires access to their personal and confidential data, which can be uncomfortable for social centre agents:

> The receptionist regularly has residents who ask her to fill out online requests. These people do not use digital technology. They entrust her with a lot of personal data.

> Despite the trust that the residents have in her, she is very uncomfortable and even nervous about entering the online files. She makes them check each time that she has left their account and has no data. (an urban social centre).

Several professionals raised the issue of responsibility in case of the disclosure and misuse of personal data, and especially responsibility in case of any mistakes they may have made when accompanying the inhabitants in administrative procedures, for example in applying for a tax declaration or making a request for social benefits. The question of the limits of their action thus raises the question of the possibility of being held responsible for errors and/or of reactions of discontent on the part of individuals against them, thus contributing to maintaining the distance between these populations and the institutions.

Tensions that concern organisational and institutional dimensions

The questioning of the limits of the actions required in response to requests for administrative assistance also has organisational considerations, with a tension between the diversity of, and increase in, requests on the one hand, and inadequate means (financial, human, material), on the other. The reception desks are not designed to deal with requests for individual assistance, and the help desks dealing with administrative issues may be insufficient to meet the growing demands. For example, in a social centre containing this type of office, the waiting list for the residents to see someone exceeds 3 weeks. The lack of funding, when administrative assistance is provided in activities not dedicated to this subject, or the non-permanent nature of the funding, contribute to reinforcing this organisational tension.

The last limitation concerns institutional issues. In all the focus groups, participants raised the issue of the social centres' current role, and the role they will have to define for themselves in the future. The predominant feeling is that of being subjected to the digital transformation and the reorganisation of local administration reception points, without having the time to collectively define the position of social centres. On the latter point, staff share the feeling that they are compensating for the lack of resources of other actors and the withdrawal of public services in the territories, by responding to requests for administrative assistance themselves, thus contributing to accentuating these developments:

> The social centre can accompany the inhabitants so that they can have access to their benefits in all autonomy [...] but should not be the solution to the desertification of public services. It is above all a political question. (a rural social centre).

These questions are coupled with a concern about the risk of making the extent and consequences of the administrative difficulties encountered by individuals invisible and dispersed by helping to resolve them:

> Be careful not to make the needs of the inhabitants invisible by dealing with their needs instead of the administrations. (an urban social centre).

Where does the role of social centres begin and, above all, where does it end? How far can they go in responding to these growing demands, and thus compensate for (and hide) the system's shortcomings? How far should they go in a logic of public service delegation, taking on tasks that were previously carried out by local administrations? These questions are at the heart of a very strong debate within the social centres, which remains open. Importantly, the centres operate within a diverse range of territorial configurations and with the presence or absence of successful collaborations. In some areas, social centres are financed to promote access to social rights and services, for example by signing agreements with the administration in charge of retirement (Blanchet, 2021). This formalised role for some social centres is far from being the case everywhere or across all tasks and subjects. This is an example of the difficulty social centres have in identifying the limits of their role and in 'reconciling the reclaiming of a critical collective voice, one that makes demands and is even conflictual, with the maintenance of partnership relations with public institutions' (Neveu, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This article has shown the growing role of third-party actors such as social centres, which are being called upon to lighten the administrative burden, particularly in the context of a converging movement in France and many other countries towards digital transformation. Social centres are trying to help individuals to alleviate the three types of administrative burden they experience, with action focused mainly on learning and compliance costs, rather than psychological costs. Above all, it appears that the social centres' role relies on professionals and volunteers with a range of very different positions, missions

and responsibilities, who offer their support in spaces that are sometimes invisible. The response to individuals' administrative burdens thus sometimes overwhelms social centres. This evolution, which cuts across all the centres in the survey, raises profound tensions among professionals and institutions, in dimensions that intersect moral, ethical, legal and political domains. The analysis of these tensions could be the focus of further research. For which professionals and volunteers are they most acute? What organisational and institutional conditions attenuate or intensify these tensions? Do they lead to reduced support for individuals?

In presenting its findings, this article is in line with the proposals of researchers calling for the development of a research agenda on actors outside the state-citizen relationship (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021). I agree with Tiggelaar and George's (2023) argument that 'when it comes to studying administrative burdens, especially in the current collaborative governance era, the role of these third sector organisations simply cannot be ignored'. There is indeed a challenge in mapping all the actors involved in administrative assistance, who have different characteristics, frames of reference, and intervention methods. Because of the increasing territorialisation of public action (Andreotti & Mingione, 2013), this mapping must be done at the local level if we are to understand how the actors involved in this field are recomposed and organised, or not.

Finally, these different observations of the role of third-party actors deserve to be discussed again in relation to the initial subject of the study, the non-take-up of social benefits. There is still a lack of knowledge about the impact on individuals of the growing role played by these organisations, which operate in domains previously handled by local administrations. Does this transformation reduce situations of the non-take-up of social rights, or increase them? Of the individuals seeking out benefits and services, how many are relying only on social centres to do so? It is also striking that the issues related to the increasing role of third-party actors are not part of the current reflections on the actions against non-take-up proposed by the French government. The main levers currently being advocated aim to simplify the administrative procedures for some social benefits and to develop outreach procedures on the margins to reach the people who are furthest from the state institutions. The issue of non-take-up is often perceived as a technical question (Daigneault, 2023), even though it covers political aspects such as the organisation of the response to the administrative burden that contributes to inequalities in access to social rights.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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